



# Chicago Varnish Co. Building

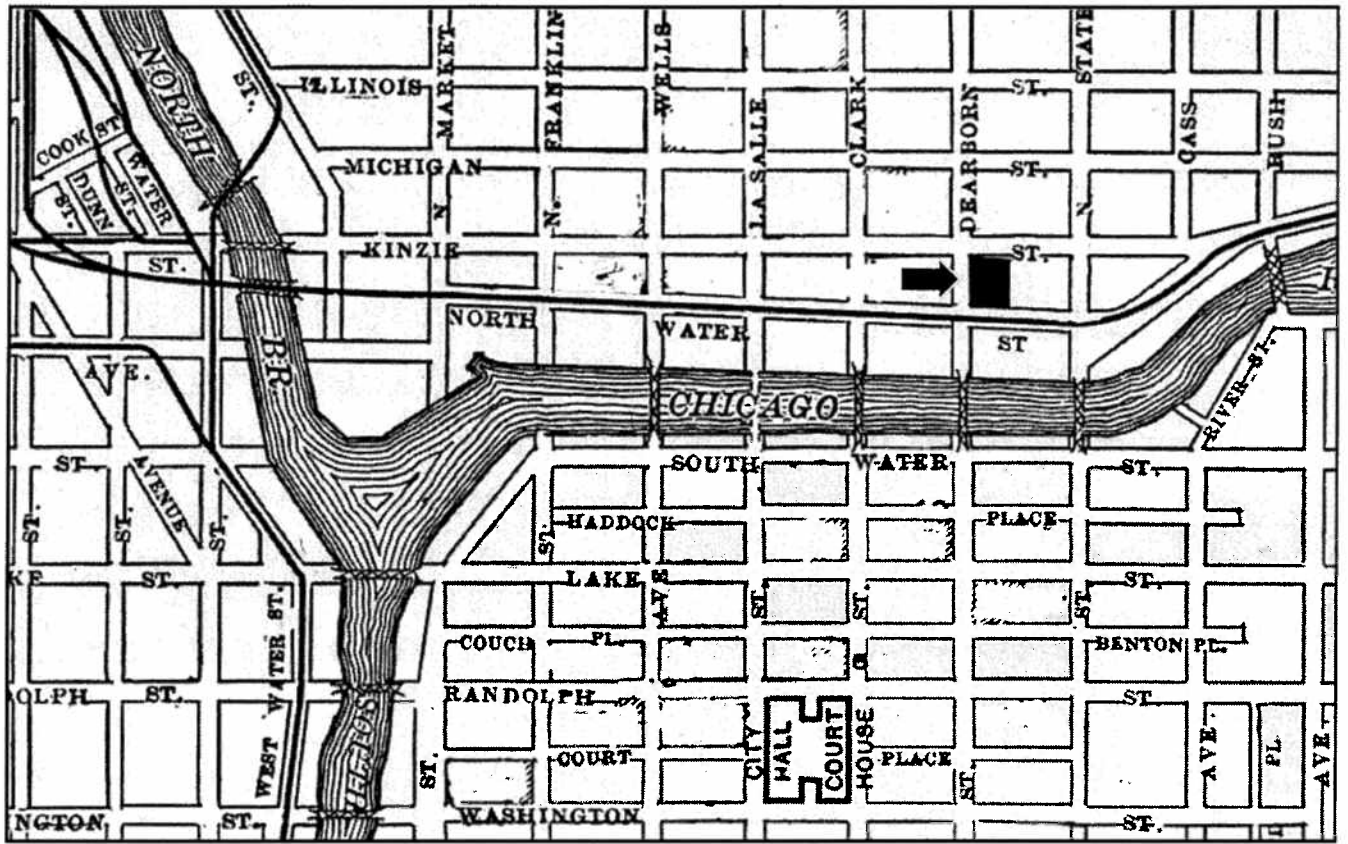
33 W. Kinzie St.

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Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks on August 4, 1999

CITY OF CHICAGO  
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development  
Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner



**Above:**

The location of the Chicago Varnish building (arrow), at the corner of Dearborn and Kinzie streets, just north of the Chicago River, is depicted on this 1893 map (showing the period street names) of the Loop and Near North Side.

**Cover:**

The Chicago Varnish building, shown shortly after it opened in 1895, is a rare and excellent example of Dutch Renaissance Revival architecture.

*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks.*

*The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council following a detailed designation process. It begins with staff report on the historical and architectural background and significance of the proposed landmark. The next step is a vote by the Landmarks Commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. Not only does this preliminary vote initiate the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until the final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.*

*Please note that this landmark designation report is subject to possible revision during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance recommended to City Council should be regarded as final.*

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# Chicago Varnish Co. Building

33 W. Kinzie St.

**Built:** 1895  
**Architect:** Henry Ives Cobb

When the Chicago Varnish building was built in 1895, it dramatically stood out in its neighborhood. Located among ordinary-looking shipping and manufacturing structures and the nearby slums just north of the Chicago River, the Chicago Varnish building was splendidly distinguished by its finely finished brick- and stone work and its animated roofline. It had character and refinement, qualities lacking in the mostly utilitarian buildings that surrounded it.

While other businessmen building in the area had settled for plain, unadorned loft structures, the owners of the Chicago Varnish Co. had specifically chosen an architect and style of the highest caliber. Henry Ives Cobb ran one of the city's largest and most active architecture offices, and he was a nationally known designer who employed a variety of historical styles. As a result, the Chicago Varnish building was designed in a lavish style—Dutch Renaissance Revival—rarely used in Chicago.

Today, the Chicago Varnish building is best known as the home of Harry Caray's Restaurant, which was named for the famed late baseball announcer. Although the character of the surrounding neighborhood has changed dramatically over the years, the building still remains an anomaly, distinguished as much by its comparatively small scale in a forest of skyscrapers as it is by its old-world charm and careful architectural detailing.



The building's unique design was highlighted by the Chicago Varnish Co. in its advertisements. This ad was published c. 1900.

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## The Origins of the Chicago Varnish Co.



Otho Morgan (photo c. 1875) and his father-in-law Anson Potwin founded the Chicago Varnish Co. in 1865.

The Chicago Varnish Co. was founded in 1865 by Anson C. Potwin (c. 1805-1888) and his son-in law, former Union Army Captain Otho H. Morgan (1838-1923). Potwin's son, William S. (1838-1920), joined the business in 1879. According to a description of the company published in 1917, the company was "instituted on a modest scale and the development of the enterprise kept pace with the marvelous progress of Chicago, especially after the great Chicago fire of 1871."

Varnish-making was one of those essential, but unglamorous, components of architecture and the decorative arts trades. Its value was the subject of the nearly poetic musings of the author of *Chicago Commerce* in 1884:

Indeed, when we come to consider how large a part varnish plays in the affairs of life there is still room for surprise even to the best informed. Where I sit writing, this desk on which I lean, the chair in which I sit, and indeed most of the furniture which meets the eye, owes its lustrous beauty to a cloudy mass of gum which years ago exuded from giant trees in the heart of Madagascar.

Varnish is a resin-based solution most often used for finishing woodwork. In combination with oils, such as linseed or tung oil, it forms a thin, hard surface which can be tinted, making it valuable for both its protective and decorative qualities. In addition to furniture and woodwork applications, varnishes were also employed for painting conservation and maritime uses. There are two basic types of varnishes: *oil*, which is made from hard gum or resins (e.g. copal from African forests) and is used mainly for woodwork; and *spirit*, derived from softer resins found in southeast Asia, used for paintings.

When the Chicago Varnish Co. was formed, it was one of only five varnish manufacturers in Chicago. Its offices and factory were located on the west side of Pine Street—now Michigan Avenue—between Delaware and Chestnut streets (now the location of the Fourth Presbyterian Church), in an area known as "the Sands." The Lake Michigan shoreline was then located immediately across Pine Street.

The business was incorporated in 1883, but it appears to have been a closely-held corporation between members of the Potwin and Morgan families. Anson Potwin, who was the president of the firm from its founding, died in 1888 and was succeeded by Morgan. William Potwin

became the treasurer and general manager. The following year, the firm moved its factory complex from Pine Street, which was becoming an upscale residential neighborhood, to the 2100-block of North Elston Avenue, between Paulina and Ashland avenues. However, the company retained its business office on Pine Street.

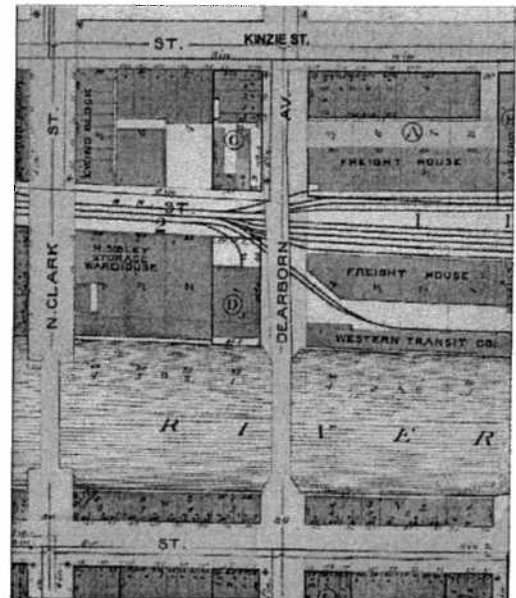
Demand for Chicago Varnish's products increased during the 1880s and '90s, as people in Chicago and elsewhere built larger houses and commercial buildings with elaborate woodwork. The company opened branch offices in Boston (1884) and New York (1892). The firm was one of the leading manufacturers in the city, and was described in *A History of the City of Chicago* (1900), which portrayed the growth of the city and its major businesses:

The special lines of goods manufactured by this [Chicago Varnish] company are varnishes for railroad equipment; for coaches and carriages; for the interior of buildings. From the costly residence to the humble cottage; for omnibuses, wagons and agricultural implements of every description, and also for pianos, furniture, caskets, and various other purposes. It manufactures the remarkable marine varnish known as "Navalite," which has a world-wide reputation for its beauty and durability, this latter quality being one of which the company boasts in all its productions.

In 1892, Chicago Varnish leased space in the Loop (on Dearborn Street, between Randolph and Lake streets) for its offices. That same year, the firm purchased the parcel on the southeast corner of Dearborn and Kinzie streets, apparently with the intention of constructing its own edifice. However, for unknown reasons, work on the new structure did not begin until 1894, and city directories first listed the company at its new location in 1895.

When the Chicago Varnish Co. opened its new headquarters, the area just north of the Chicago River was a jumble of factories, warehouses, and rail- and shipyards. Many of the city's first factories had sprung up on the river's north bank, including a tannery, brickyard, iron foundries, and breweries. The north bank was also an important site for railroad operations, dating back to 1847, when the Galena and Chicago Union laid tracks running down the center of Kinzie Street. Railroad freight yards and warehouses soon occupied large tracts of land on the river front.

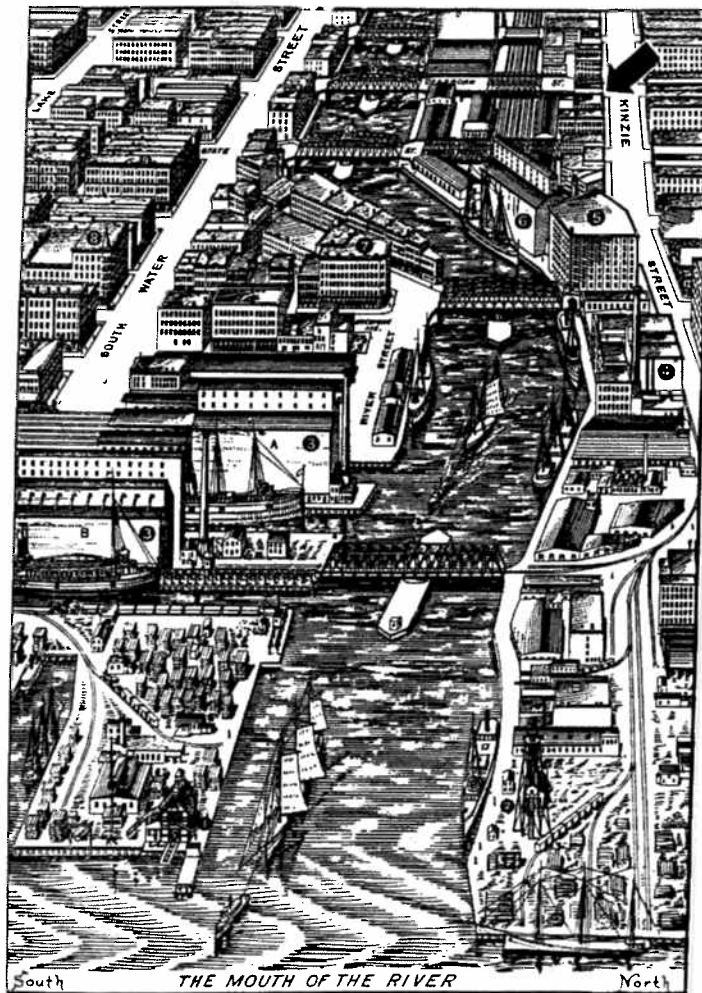
Workers in these early businesses lived in frame cottages west of Wells Street, while the well-to-do lived in mansions along Wabash Avenue and Rush Street, north of Ohio Street. Although the Great Fire of 1871 destroyed



This 1891 fire insurance map depicts the warehouses and railroad tracks that filled the blocks just north of the Chicago River. The future site of the Chicago Varnish Co. is shown at the southeast corner of Kinzie and Dearborn.

almost everything in the area, it was rebuilt largely with its old mix of uses. During the 1880s and 1890s, many of the one- and two-story commercial and residential buildings were replaced with loft structures of five and six stories.

The density and range of uses must have made this area a busy, loud, and odoriferous place. Given this environment, the choice by the Chicago Varnish Co. of this site for its offices and showroom—a place to bring clients and display the company's products—seems strange. Nonetheless, the location's shipping advantages must have outweighed any disadvantages when the partners decided to proceed with their building.



As suggested by this 1893 drawing, the Chicago River, flanked by rail lines, proved an ideal location for the various manufacturing concerns that lined it at the turn-of-the-century. The future site of the Chicago Varnish Co. (arrow) is visible near the upper-right-hand-corner.

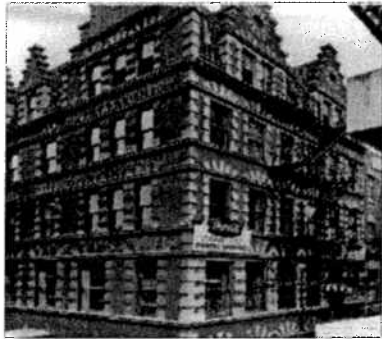


The Chicago Varnish Building is a textbook example of the Dutch Renaissance Revival Style. Its unique appearance and old-world charm prompted Paul Gapp, the late architecture critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, to call it one of his 20 "favorite Chicago buildings, spaces, places and things." The stepped gables (below) are one of the many elaborate decorative details that make it an unrivaled example of the style.

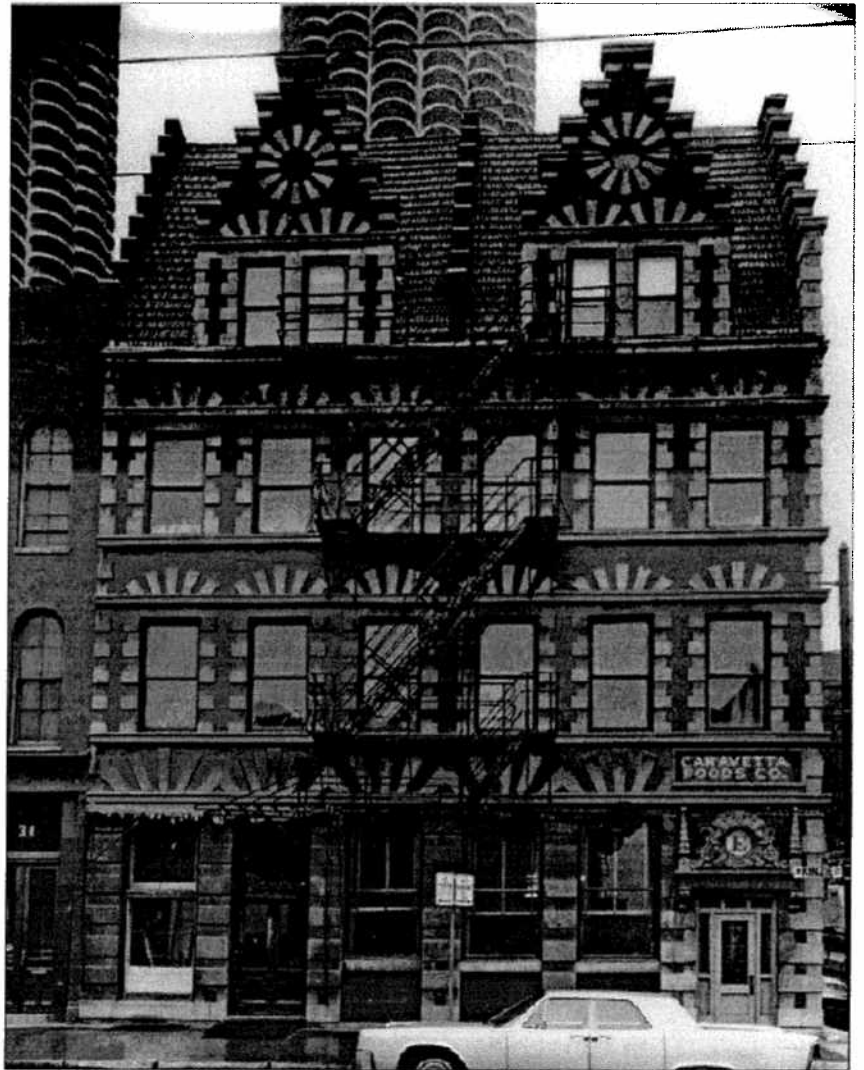
### **The Building and its Dutch Renaissance Revival Architecture**

At first sight, the four-story Chicago Varnish building impresses one with the richness of its ornament. No detail, no window, no corner passed from under the architect's pen unembellished. The profusion of decoration serves to exaggerate the building's elements and make them something extraordinary. Windows are not simply framed, they are surmounted by a sunburst pattern of brick and stone. The already steep angle of the roof is further emphasized by stepped gables which appear to spring from the roof like pop-ups in a child's book. Originally, these gables were topped by stone half-circles and gravity-defying finials resembling elongated pawns from a chess game. (These elements were removed sometime prior to 1929.)





The Chicago Varnish Co. building has three finished elevations which have undergone relatively few changes through the years. Decorative finials (top) were removed sometime prior to 1929. View of north facade (right) as it appeared in 1963; this photo (above), taken the same year, highlights the elaborate quoins on the southwest corner of the building.



The design of the Chicago Varnish building is based on Dutch Renaissance architecture, which was used on 17th-century commercial buildings in Holland. Like its Dutch prototypes, the Chicago Varnish building has the same tight brickwork, window arches with stone banding, circular windows, and distinctive stepped gables. The nearly hedonistic pleasure in decoration, together with a controlled sense of craft, characterizes both the Dutch originals and their Chicago cousin.

The building has three finished elevations: on the north (Kinzie Street), west (Dearborn Street), and south. When the building was constructed, the south face of the building was more prominent because it faced a wide alley and only a one-story freight house stood between it and the Chicago River. Its prominence was further heightened due to the original configuration of the east half of Dearborn Street as a ramp sloping down to the river.



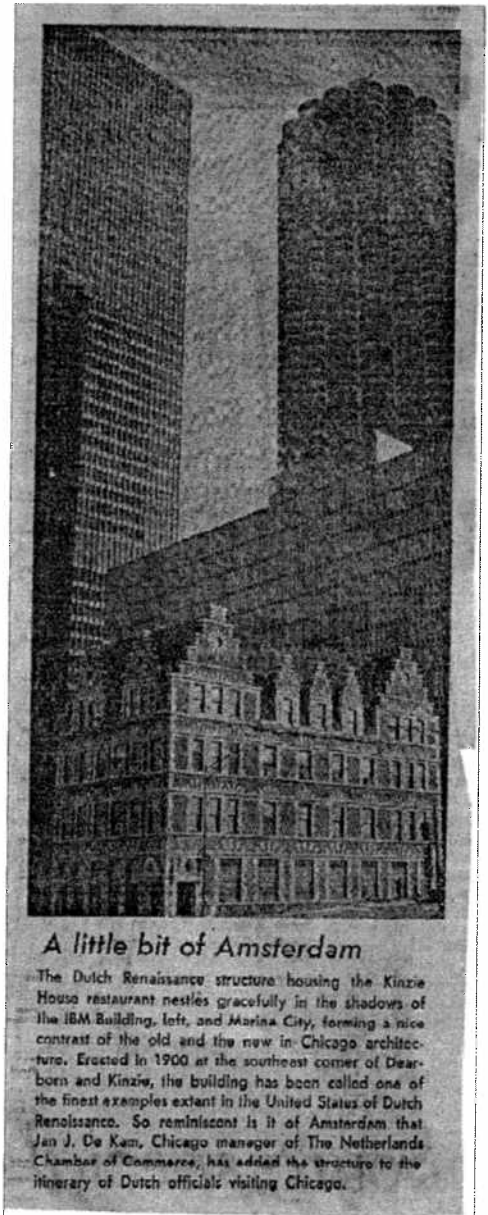
Much of the building's visual impact stems from its distinctive masonry composition. The three finished elevations are of red pressed brick, with contrasting grey limestone that crisply outlines the building edges and window openings. An unusual amount of decorative stonework animates these facades, including: continuous sill and lintel courses, "voussoirs" radiating from the lintels, and "quoins" at the corners of the building.

The building's series of stepped gables, however, is its most prominent reference to Dutch architecture. This stepped-edge configuration—called corbiesteps, catsteps, or crowsteps—was developed by Dutch builders, reportedly as an expedient way to mask pitched roofs without having to cut bricks to match the pitch of the roofline. Beyond their obvious ornamental contribution, these high-pitched gables give the building a decidedly vertical character and a strong presence among the larger-scaled neighboring buildings.

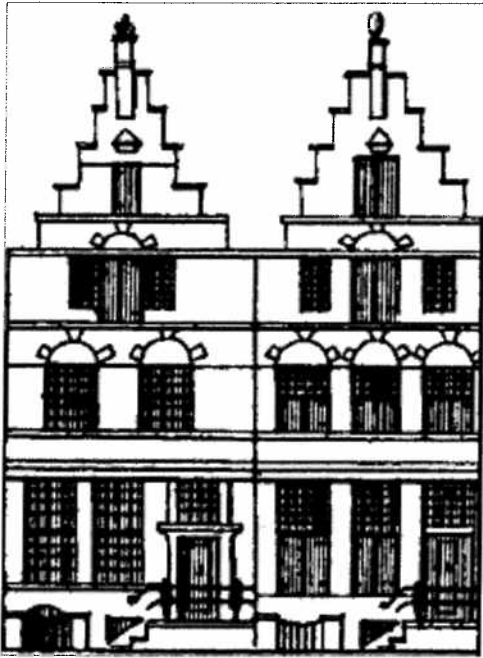
Ornate stonework at the corner of Dearborn and Kinzie marks the original main entrance. Now enclosed with windows, the recessed corner entrance is indicated by large lintels surmounted by carved-stone "roundels" (clocks were initially in these round openings). A pair of stone finials, probably removed in the 1960s, flanked these roundels. Another distinctive period touch survives in the stone plaques featuring the "Kinzie" and "Dearborn" street names above the entrance. An additional embellishment, although now covered by contemporary neon signs, was a pair of marble mosaic plaques with the Chicago Varnish Co. name. They are yellow, with red and brown lettering and a floral border.

In virtually all its details, the Chicago Varnish building is an extraordinarily faithful and refined example of the Dutch Renaissance Revival style. The choice of this style gave Morgan and Potwin a dignified headquarters, one where they could take visiting clients to impress them with the company's wares. It also invited comparisons between late-19th-century Chicago and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Holland, where it originated.

The original Dutch Renaissance style had reached its height during a time when Holland was a leading force in international commerce. A strong Dutch middle class—profiting from trade and its nation's colonies in North America and the South Pacific—was at its most comfortable, and a distinctive type of commercial architecture developed. As merchants, traders, and moneyed people, the Dutch middle-class was large and could afford to spend money embellishing the buildings they used for business, such as warehouses.



**The contrast between the Chicago Varnish building and the nearby modern high-rises is highlighted in this 1972 *Chicago Sun-Times* photograph that accompanied an article on a Chicago tour itinerary for Dutch visitors.**

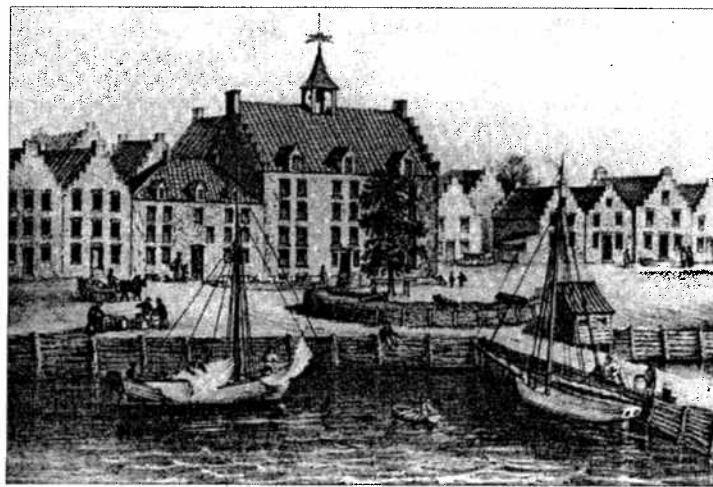


Built in 1615, this Dutch building featured stepped gables, a defining element of the Dutch Renaissance style, which reached its height of popularity in the mid-17th century. Although rows of similar buildings once lined the streets of Amsterdam, only about a hundred survive today.

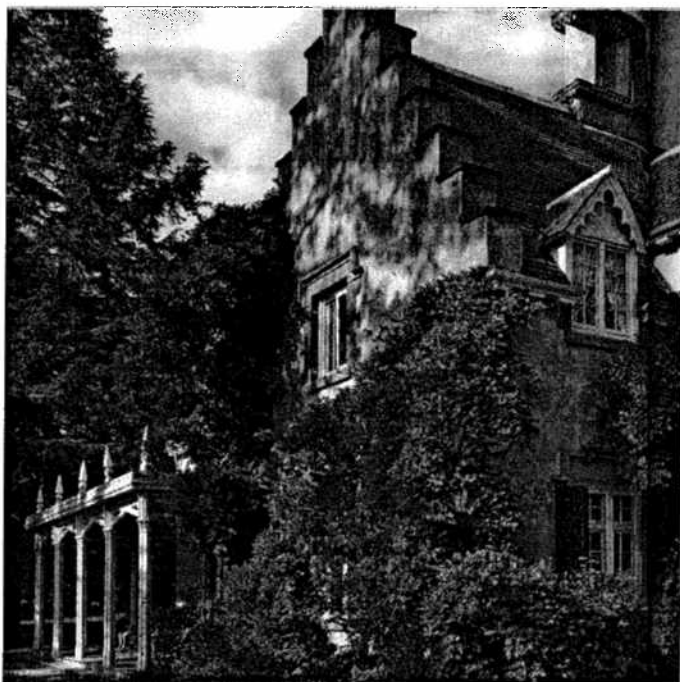
During the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, Chicago was similarly situated economically, with the rise of a large middle-class and the development of revival styles of architecture. From this perspective, the Dutch Renaissance style was an ideal model for an American commercial building, such as the Chicago Varnish building, that had higher aspirations than pure functionality.

Another aspect of Dutch Renaissance architecture is its traditional association with canals and water-borne commerce. With its proximity to the Chicago River, the Chicago Varnish building's Dutch style could not have been more appropriate. Although the adjacent rail lines were assuming most of the burden of distribution, the Chicago River was still a critical shipping link at the time the Chicago Varnish building was being built. This roughly matches circumstances in Holland where canals were used to efficiently move goods to their markets and Dutch commercial buildings were frequently situated on waterfronts.

Nevertheless, Dutch Renaissance architecture was an unusual choice for a late-19th century building in Chicago. The use of this style is normally associated with the East Coast where examples of both the original and later "revival" Dutch styles can be found. For instance, there are examples of original, 17th-century Dutch architecture in urban areas and the Upper Hudson Valley of New York (which was named New Amsterdam until 1674 when the British seized the colony and renamed it). The Dutch had been in those areas of North America since the mid-1600s.



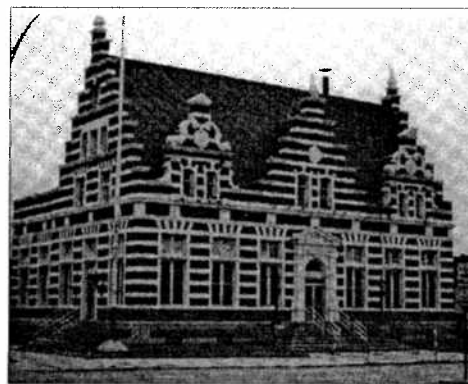
A lithograph of the City Tavern in New Amsterdam (New York) in 1642. Although Dutch Renaissance architecture is typically only associated with the Netherlands, examples of the style were also built in New York, where the Dutch settled in the 1600s.



During the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries two forms of Dutch architecture were revived in the United States: the *Dutch Renaissance Revival*, based on Holland's stepped-gable, urban mercantile buildings, and the *Dutch Colonial Revival*, which was inspired by farmhouses with "gambrel" roofs shaped like wide-flaring bells. The Dutch Colonial was an especially popular style for 1910s- and '20s-era houses. The *Chicago Historic Resources Survey* lists more than fifty examples of them.

In contrast, the Dutch Renaissance Revival, with its distinctive roofline—what architectural historian Alan Gowans calls its most "intrinsically romantic and picturesque feature"—was far more rare than the Dutch Colonial Revival style. During the 1830s, America's first best-selling author, Washington Irving, remodeled his simple wood-framed farmhouse, "Sunnyside," at Tarrytown, New York, in the Dutch Renaissance Revival style. The remodeled house, depicted in pictorial magazines, paintings and even featured on cigar boxes, was one of the most familiar houses in America in the 1850s. During the 1880s and '90s, the influential architect Calvert Vaux adapted the style for several commercial and institutional buildings in New York City.

The Chicago Varnish building is the only example of this style in Chicago, and one of the finest examples nationwide. The use of this refined style, and its skillful rendition, reflect the experience and sophistication of the building's architect, Henry Ives Cobb.



**Buildings done in the Dutch Renaissance Revival style are rare in the United States. Among the most noteworthy examples are: (top left) "Sunnyside," in Tarrytown, New York, the house that novelist Washington Irving remodeled into this style in the 1830s; (above) West End Collegiate Church and Collegiate School in New York City (1892-93); and (top) the post office (1909) in New Ulm, Minnesota.**

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## The Architect: Henry Ives Cobb



Henry Ives Cobb, the designer of the Chicago Varnish building, was one of the leading architects in Chicago during the 1880s and '90s. Cobb designed seven buildings for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, including the Fisheries Building which featured whimsically designed column capitals (below) formed from fish and snails.



Cobb (1859-1931) was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, and attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. He worked for the Boston-based firm of Peabody & Stearns until 1881, when he left the firm and moved to Chicago after winning a competition to design the Union Club house (southwest corner of Delaware and Dearborn streets; demolished).

Cobb soon formed a partnership with Charles S. Frost, another architect formerly with Peabody & Stearns. Cobb & Frost is best remembered for one of its earliest commissions, the "million-dollar mansion" for Potter Palmer (built 1882-85), which resembled a Norman castle. It stood—it has since been demolished—on Lake Shore Drive, between Banks and Schiller streets in the so-called "Gold Coast." The firm also designed commercial buildings and other large residences—including the Cable House (1885; 25 E. Erie St.; a designated Chicago Landmark)—before the partnership was dissolved in 1888 and Cobb established an independent practice.

Most of Cobb's designs are distinguished examples of historically derived architecture. A description of his work in 1896, by the famed architecture critic Montgomery Schuyler in *Architectural Record*, discerns Cobb's approach from that of other local architects:

It will have been perceived that, much more than the other architects of Chicago whose works we have been considering, Mr. Cobb "works in styles" and takes thought for academical correctness. But it is not classic purity but romantic picturesqueness that is the object of his quest, certainly in his successes.

Many of the buildings of Cobb's day were based loosely on historical styles of architecture, but the precise detailing of his buildings made them of significantly higher caliber than others. His notable works include:

- ▶ the English Gothic-inspired buildings for the University of Chicago (1891-1900);
- ▶ the Chicago Athletic Club Building (1893; 12 S. Michigan Ave.) done in the Venetian Gothic style;
- ▶ the J. A. McGill House (1890; 4938 S. Drexel Blvd.), in the style of a French Renaissance chateau;
- ▶ several buildings at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, including the Fisheries Building, based on 8<sup>th</sup>-century Romanesque architecture, and an accurate

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rendition of Northern Indian architecture for the India Pavilion;

- ▶ two Richardsonian Romanesque-style buildings: the Newberry Library (1888-92; 60 W. Walton St.) and the former Chicago Historical Society (1892-96; 632 N. Dearborn St.), both designated Chicago Landmarks.

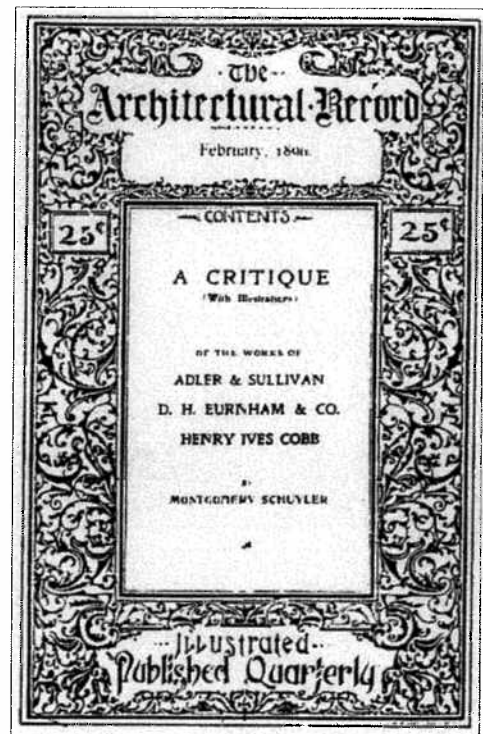
The prominence of Cobb's clients is evidence of his success. Cobb was an architect who, without being completely literal, convincingly adapted European styles to the American urban environment. Daniel Bluestone, in his 1991 book, *Constructing Chicago*, described Cobb as "experienced at linking cultural concerns and architectural forms."

As a modestly-scaled commercial structure, the Chicago Varnish building was not the sort of design Henry Ives Cobb typically took. Although Cobb did do a few simple, loft buildings, he made his reputation designing and building civic structures, academic buildings, and homes for the wealthy. These were the sorts of commissions any architect would envy: high-profile jobs, often with budgets permitting design flourishes that would otherwise have been left undone. In a recent interview, Julius Lewis, who wrote his University of Chicago masters' dissertation on Cobb, described him as "the Cadillac of architects in his day."

Again, quoting Montgomery Schuyler:

[T]he architect has reached a personal expression within the limits of an historical style, and has given evidence of an artistic individuality in addition to the abundant testimony given in his work to a remarkable technical equipment and a really astonishing versatility and facility.

This excerpt appeared in an issue devoted to three Chicago firms: Adler & Sullivan, D.H. Burnham & Co., and Cobb. This grouping is its own measure of the high esteem in which Cobb was held during his career. But as fast as his star rose, his practice rapidly declined. The financial panic of 1893 and the ensuing depression curtailed new construction, affecting Cobb and other architects. The commission for the Chicago Varnish building, which he probably began working on in 1894, was one of Cobb's last in Chicago. Subsequently, Cobb and his historicist architecture fell out of favor as later historians began to view the works of Louis Sullivan (of Adler & Sullivan) and John Root (Daniel Burnham's partner) as the prelude to Modernism.



Cobb's work, along with that of Daniel Burnham and Louis Sullivan, was featured in *Architectural Record* magazine's Great American Architects series (1896).

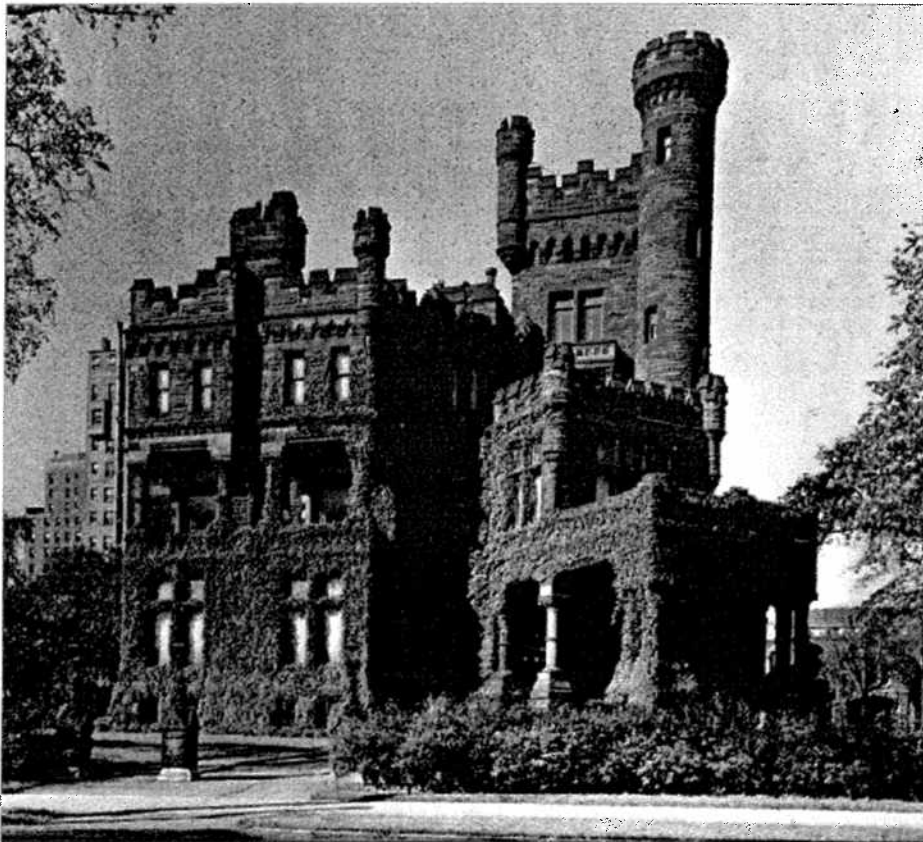
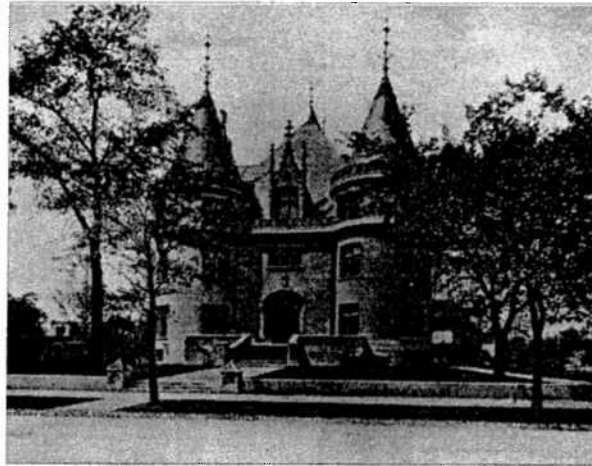
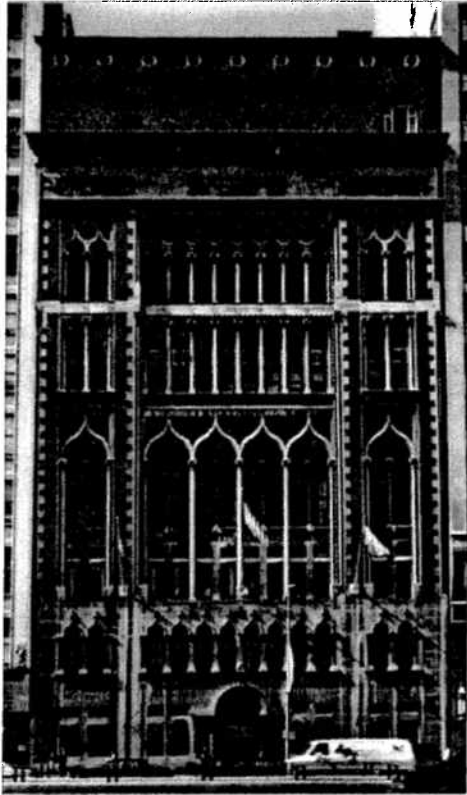
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Cobb's final work here was the Federal Building (designed in 1895; completed in 1905), which stood at Dearborn and Adams streets until 1965, on the site of the current Federal Center. It featured a spectacular 300-foot-high octagonal rotunda finished in granite and marble. It has been referred to as "an unabashed expression of civic pride" by David Lowe in *Lost Chicago*. This classically inspired edifice thrilled Chicagoans for decades.

In 1898, Cobb moved to Washington, D.C., on the promise, apparently unrealized, of a major commission for American University. Four years later he moved to New York City, where he designed several notable buildings, including the Liberty Building (1909-10), a neo-Gothic skyscraper which the *Guide to New York City Landmarks* refers to as "an important precedent to the Woolworth Building." At the time of its construction, Liberty Tower was called "the tallest building in the world on so small an area of ground."



**With its dramatic 300-foot high dome, the Federal Building, which Cobb designed in 1895 (completed in 1905), was one of the most cherished buildings in Chicago. It was demolished in 1965 for the current Federal Center.**



Henry Ives Cobb was a master of historical styles. Among his other local projects were (clockwise, from left): the Lake Shore Drive "castle" of Potter Palmer (1882-85), demolished in 1950; the Venetian Gothic-style Chicago Athletic Club Building (1892, 12 S. Michigan Ave.); the Richardsonian Romanesque-style former Chicago Historical Society Building (1892-96; 632 N. Dearborn St.); and the Chateausque-style J. A. McGill House (1890; 4938 S. Drexel Blvd.).

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## Varnish, Cheese, and Chops



The Chicago Varnish Co. sold its products nationally and had offices in Boston and New York. Its varnishes were featured in Sweet's building catalog (above), the building trades' definitive catalog of products. The company's headquarters (below) moved to 2100 N. Elston Ave. in 1910. Their new building, designed by the firm of Marshall & Fox, was executed in the Colonial Revival style.



Throughout its existence the Chicago Varnish building has had a history as varied as its surroundings. It initially housed the varnish company's offices and showrooms, and was a distribution center for its products that were being shipped on the Chicago River and by rail. Its most exotic early use, however, was a "resin museum" that the company maintained at the site for many years. The museum was described in *A History of the City of Chicago* (1900):

The ground work of fine varnishes is a fossil resin, which is found in the earth in distant parts of the world. In its Chicago office the [Chicago Varnish] company exhibits the finest collection of these resins that is to be seen anywhere. Even the most extensive museums of England and Europe do not contain an exhibit equal to this, which, for its singular beauty, is well worth a visit from anyone. In some of these transparent pieces of resins are embedded superb beetles, preserved for all time from the action of the air, and thus displaying them in the natural beauty of life. These insects thus buried are perhaps thousands of years old. The company has been gathering this collection for over a quarter of a century, and is continually adding new specimens of interest and value.

(The company donated its collection of more than 300 specimens to the Field Museum of Natural History in 1913-14).

Changes in the area began to affect the varnish company's operations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Shipping by rail and truck supplanted river transit, and wholesale grocery companies and food processors became the dominant industries north of the river. Large warehouses—like those of the Hiram Sibley Co. (1883; since demolished), which faced the Chicago River between Clark and Dearborn streets; Thompson Baking Co. (1912), southwest corner of Kinzie and Clark streets; and Reid, Murdoch & Co. (1914), facing the river between Clark and LaSalle streets—were built in the area to take advantage of the nearby rail lines. The varnish company's office and showroom activities became increasingly at odds with other uses.

In 1910, the company left the building, consolidating its operations at the Elston Avenue factory site, where a new administration building was constructed. Designed by the prestigious architecture firm of Marshall & Fox, this Georgian-Revival building (1909; 2100 N. Elston Ave.) was said to have been modeled on Liberty Hall in Philadelphia.



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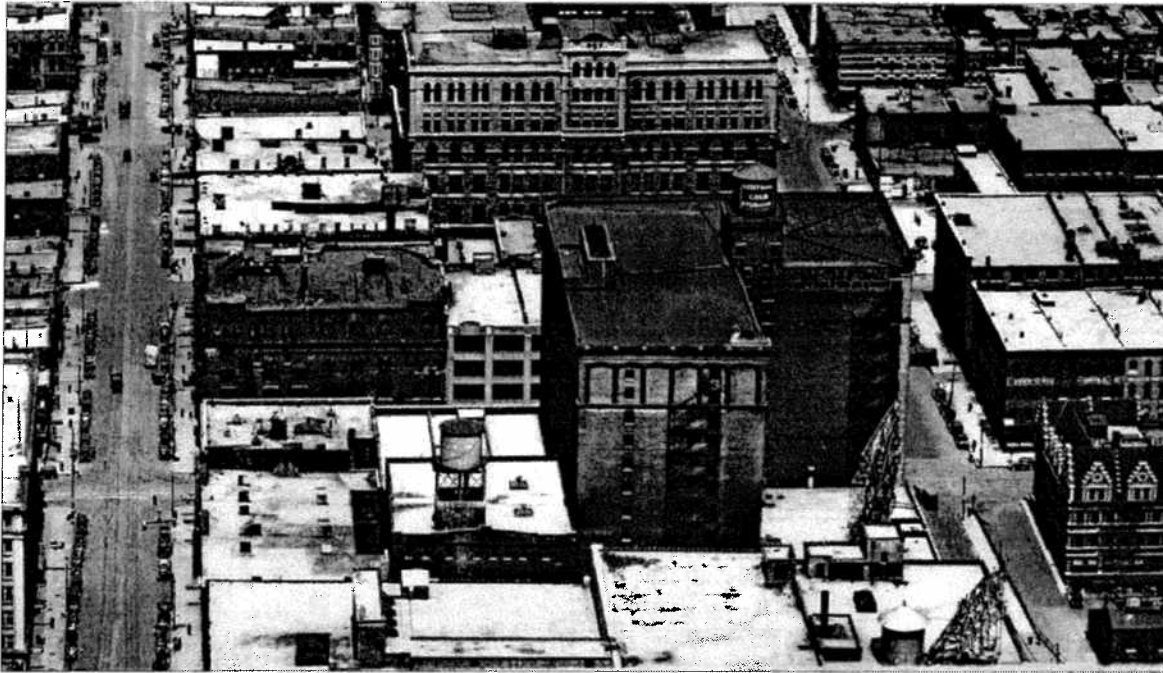
Otho Morgan and William Potwin continued to lead the company. A description of the business in 1917 lists them as the president and first vice-president, respectively, and notes that the company was “one of the largest concerns of its kind in the Union.” However, the deaths of Potwin and Morgan, in 1920 and 1923 respectively, appear to have brought about the circumstances leading to the company’s dissolution three years later.

In 1925, the Kinzie Street building, which had been leased to various entities since 1910, was sold by the company. For the next four-and-a-half decades, the building was the headquarters for two food processing companies.

Thomas Alexander Somerville bought the building in 1925, and his company, Hunter, Walton & Co., used the structure as the offices and distribution plant of its wholesale butter, egg, and cheese business.



This 1923 image of Dearborn Street, looking north across the Chicago River, shows the area’s large-scale buildings that housed wholesale food companies. The Chicago Varnish building can be seen on the right-hand side of the photograph, just above the bridge tender’s house.



This 1929 photograph shows how the picturesque appearance of the Chicago Varnish building, lower right, made it stand out from the more plainly designed warehouses in the River North area. The Cook County Criminal Courts Building (now Courthouse Place) is at the top of the photo.

Louis Caravetta, owner of the Ehrat Cheese Co., bought the building in 1939. Photos taken during the company's occupation show an "E" (for Ehrat) covering the clock faces in the stone roundels over the corner entrance. The company, which packaged Italian specialty foods, used the building for curing, grating, packaging, and distributing the food products processed at its Wisconsin plant. To accommodate these uses, Caravetta had architects Dubin & Dubin draw up remodeling plans in 1946. Much of the original interior spaces and finishes were likely altered at that time.

The attic story of the building housed an apartment which is still intact. In fact, a previous tenant of this apartment is reputed to have been Frank Nitti, who was nicknamed "The Enforcer" and was one of gangster Al Capone's infamous lieutenants. According to the website for Harry Caray's Restaurant ([www.harrycarays.com](http://www.harrycarays.com)), Nitti, a relative of Caravetta, lived in the apartment from 1939 until his death in 1943.

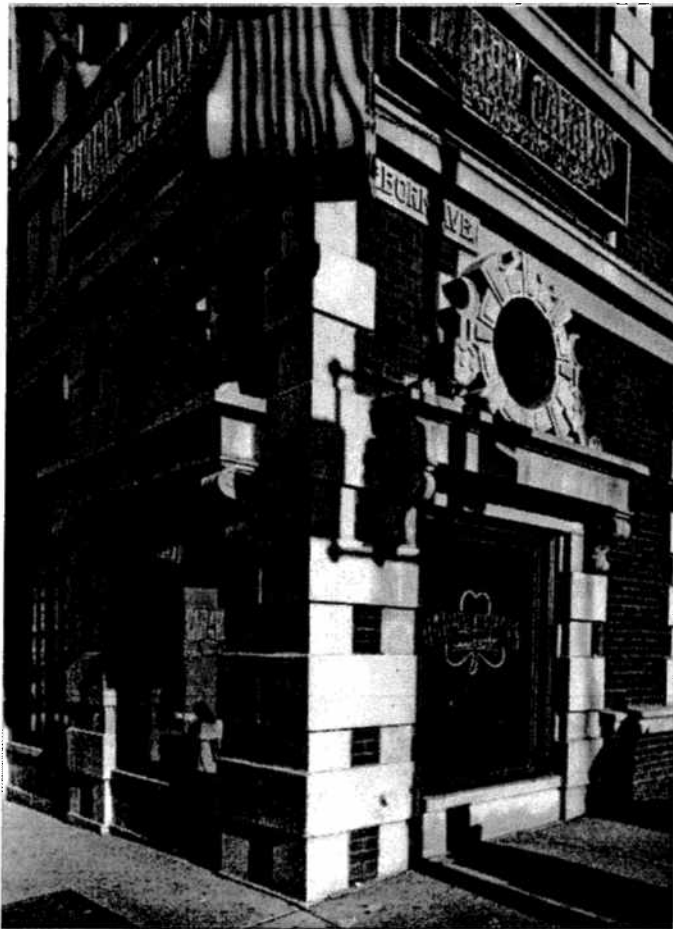
Over the last three decades, the use of the building has shifted from food processing to fine dining, in response to the popularity of the Near North Side as a center for nightlife. In 1971, the Ehrat Co. leased the building to the Kinzie Street Steak and Chop House. In 1980, the building was sold to the Miller brothers, who operated "Miller's on Kinzie" steak house.

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In 1986, Dearborn-Kinzie Partners purchased the building and refurbished it, cleaned the masonry, and installed new windows that replicated the original double-hung configuration. Harry Caray's Restaurant was designed to occupy all four floors of the building, and the late broadcaster's celebrity has given further prominence to an already well-known landmark. Said Caray at the time:

I have had many offers over the years to open a restaurant and I have declined all of them. The beauty and depth of this well-known building and excitement that will be generated by it really caught my attention.

Amazingly, through all of these ownerships, the exterior of the building remains remarkably intact—a tribute to both its craftsmanship and its distinctive style of architecture.



The now-enclosed corner entrance (above) still features decorative stone hoods, "roundels," and street-name plaques. Right: the corner entrance as it appeared in 1963 when the building was occupied by Caravetta Foods Co. and Ehrat Cheese Co., two food wholesalers operated by the building owner Louis Caravetta.



**1895:** This promotional print was taken shortly after the building opened and before the street level was altered.



**1963:** The Dearborn Street facade as it appeared when the street-level was being raised. The new street viaduct obscures the basement level window visible in this photo.

**1986:** During the building's use by "Miller's on Kinzie" steak house.



**1999:** The building as it appears today.



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# APPENDIX

## Criteria for Designation

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sec. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to recommend a building or district for landmark designation if the Commission determines that it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for landmark designation,” as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

Based on the findings in this report, the following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Chicago Varnish building be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

### Criterion 1:

#### ***(Critical Part of the City’s Heritage)***

*Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspects of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

The uses of the Chicago Varnish building are representative of the industrial and commercial heritage of that part of the River North community just north of the Chicago River. Today, most of the old structures dating from River North’s industrial past are gone. But the Chicago Varnish building remains as one of the few examples of the area’s origins as a manufacturing and distribution center.

The first occupant of the building was the Chicago Varnish Co., one of the leading varnish makers in the country, which had been in business since 1865. When the firm opened its new headquarters in 1895, the River North area was a jumble of factories, warehouses, and rail-and shipyards. The varnish company’s use of the building as administrative offices and storage was consistent with the variety of wholesaling and industrial concerns in the area.

Later occupants of the building reflected the emergence of food processing and wholesale grocery businesses as the dominant uses north of the river. In 1925, the building was sold to Thomas Sommerville whose company, Hunter, Walton & Co., used the building as the offices and distribution plant of its wholesale butter, egg, and cheese business. Louis Caravetta, owner of the Ehrat Cheese Co., bought the

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building in 1939 and used it for curing, grating, packaging, and distributing the company's Italian specialty foods.

During the past three decades, the Chicago Varnish building has developed into a visual icon for a new type of River North use—restaurants. Its current user is Haray Caray's Restaurant.

**Criterion 4:**  
***(Important Architecture)***

*Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship.*

The Chicago Varnish building is a rare and particularly fine example of Dutch Renaissance Revival architecture. There are few examples of this style in Chicago and none is as faithful to the originals in Holland as the Chicago Varnish building. The rarity and charm of its architecture led Paul Gapp, the late architecture critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, to call it one of his 20 "favorite Chicago buildings, spaces, places, and things."

The commercial nature of the building lends it a particular verisimilitude with its Dutch cousins. Holland was one of the few countries to, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, develop a sophisticated middle-class architecture which celebrated commerce. Thus, the Dutch revival style proved a particularly apt choice for the Chicago Varnish building. As a warehouse, office and product museum, the Chicago Varnish building was more ambitious than the humbler industrial structures surrounding it in 1895. The Dutch style lent the Chicago Varnish building the appropriate architectural vocabulary to express its higher aspirations.

The building's series of stepped gables is its most prominent reference to Dutch architecture. The high gables give special emphasis to the building's vertical quality, a characteristic of the Dutch style. The building's profusion of ornament and lively brickwork are also characteristic of the Dutch Renaissance Revival style. Brick is contrasted with decorative stonework in a manner that is typical of the Dutch style. The stonework includes continuous sill and lintel courses, voussoirs radiating from the lintels, and quoins at the corners of the building.

The quality of workmanship is high on the Chicago Varnish building and it has been well maintained. The masonry is tight and the stone well-fitted. The distinctive ornamental stonework remains mostly in place, with the exception of the decorative finials (removed sometime

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prior to 1929) which surmounted the gables when the building was completed.

**Criteria 5:**  
***(Important Architect)***

*Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois or the United States.*

Henry Ives Cobb (1859-1931) was an architect of local and national reputation. In Chicago, he won many of the most prestigious commissions, such as:

- ▶ the campus plan and several buildings for the University of Chicago (1891-1900);
- ▶ Chicago Athletic Club Building (1893; 12 S. Michigan Ave.);
- ▶ J. A. McGill House (1890; 4938 S. Drexel Blvd.);
- ▶ Several buildings at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893;
- ▶ Newberry Library Building (1888-92; 60 W. Walton St.; part of the Washington Square Chicago Landmark district);
- ▶ the former Chicago Historical Society Building (1892-96; 632 N. Dearborn St.; a designated Chicago Landmark); and
- ▶ the Federal Building (designed in 1895; completed in 1905) which stood at Dearborn and Adams streets until 1965, on the site of the current Federal Center.

The prominence of these clients illustrates his success.

Cobb's talent was recognized in his era. A lengthy laudatory essay written by the most prominent architecture critic of the time, Montgomery Schuyler, is a virtual catalog of Cobb's designs. His work, along with that of two other important architecture offices, Adler & Sullivan and D.H. Burnham & Co., was featured in an issue of the *Architectural Record* (1896) devoted entirely to architecture in Chicago. This grouping is its own measure of the high esteem in which Cobb was held during his career.

As illustrated by the Chicago Varnish building, Cobb was most interested in historical and eclectic styles from Europe, but he was also attentive to work being done by his contemporaries. Cobb admired the designs of H.H. Richardson and imitated his Romanesque style in both the Newberry Library and the former Chicago Historical Society. Cobb worked in a variety of historical revival styles. In this respect he was like most architects of his day, but the precise detailing of his buildings made them of significantly higher caliber than others.

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## **Integrity**

*The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.*

The Chicago Varnish building looks much the same today as it did when it was first built. The major change affecting the building was the construction of the Dearborn Street viaduct. When the building was constructed, the east half of Dearborn Street sloped down to the river. The reconfiguration of the roadway in 1963 angled the street upward, covering the lower part of the building's Dearborn Street wall.

The most obvious—though minor—alteration, apparent to anyone who has seen historic photographs of the building, is the removal of the finials that originally topped the gables. They were no longer in place by 1929 when the area was photographed.

The original recessed corner entry has also been changed over the years. Originally an open alcove, it has been remodeled several times to enclose the alcove. The two pairs of decorative finials over the corner entrance were removed sometime after 1963.

The masonry has been well preserved, as has the window treatment which maintains the original double-hung configuration.

## **Significant Historical and Architectural Features**

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the “significant historical and architectural features” of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its evaluation of the Chicago Varnish building, the Commission staff recommends that the significant historical and architectural features be identified as:

the north (Kinzie Street), west (Dearborn Street), and south exterior elevations of the building, as well as the entire roofline of the building.

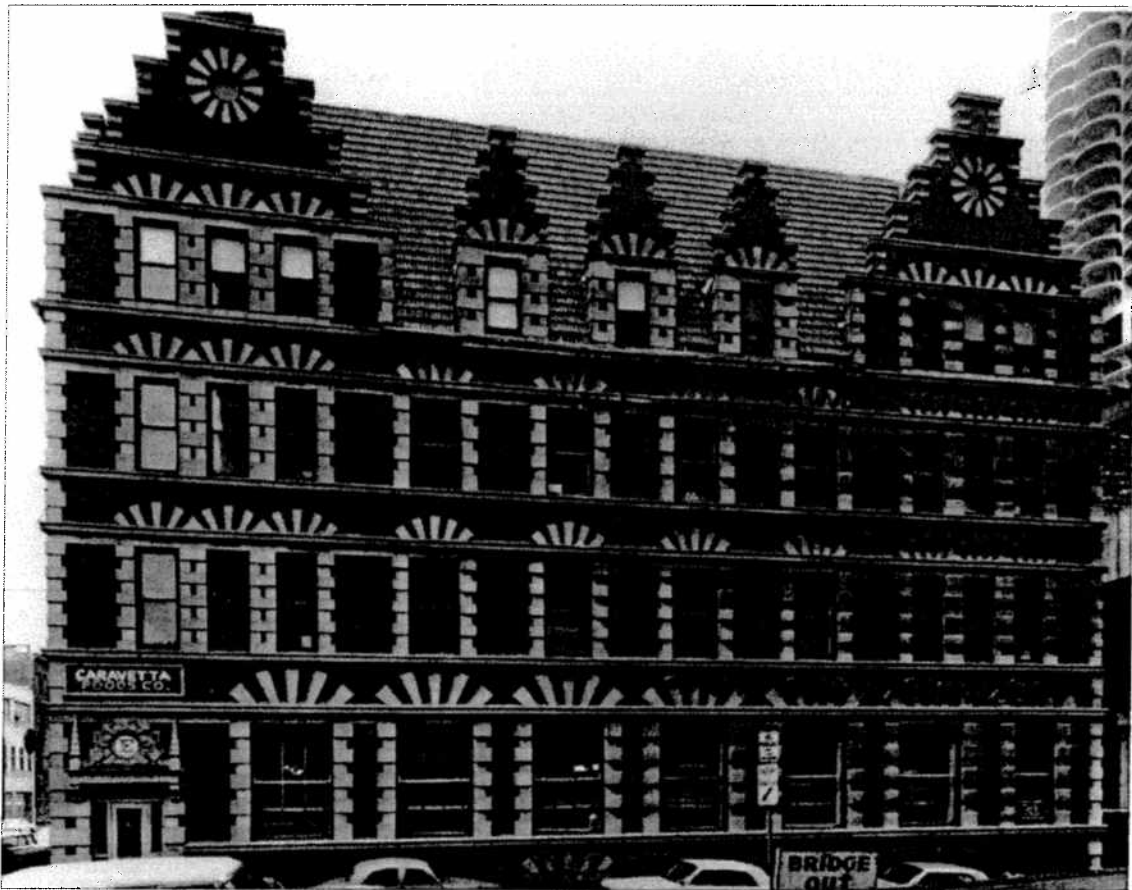


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The east elevation is a common-brick facade with no window openings. It has two stepped gables; however, their detailing is much simpler than that on the three finished facades. There are no windows in them and they do not have the elaborate stone trimming.

## **Building Rehabilitation Issues**

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks bases its review of all city-issued permits related to a landmark property on its adopted *Guidelines for Alterations to Historic Buildings and New Construction*, as well as the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's *Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*. The purpose of the Commission's review is to protect and enhance the landmark's significant historical and architectural features.



Despite a variety of uses throughout the years, the building (seen here in 1963) has undergone only relatively minor alterations—a true testament to the enduring design created by its architect, Henry Ives Cobb.

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## Acknowledgments

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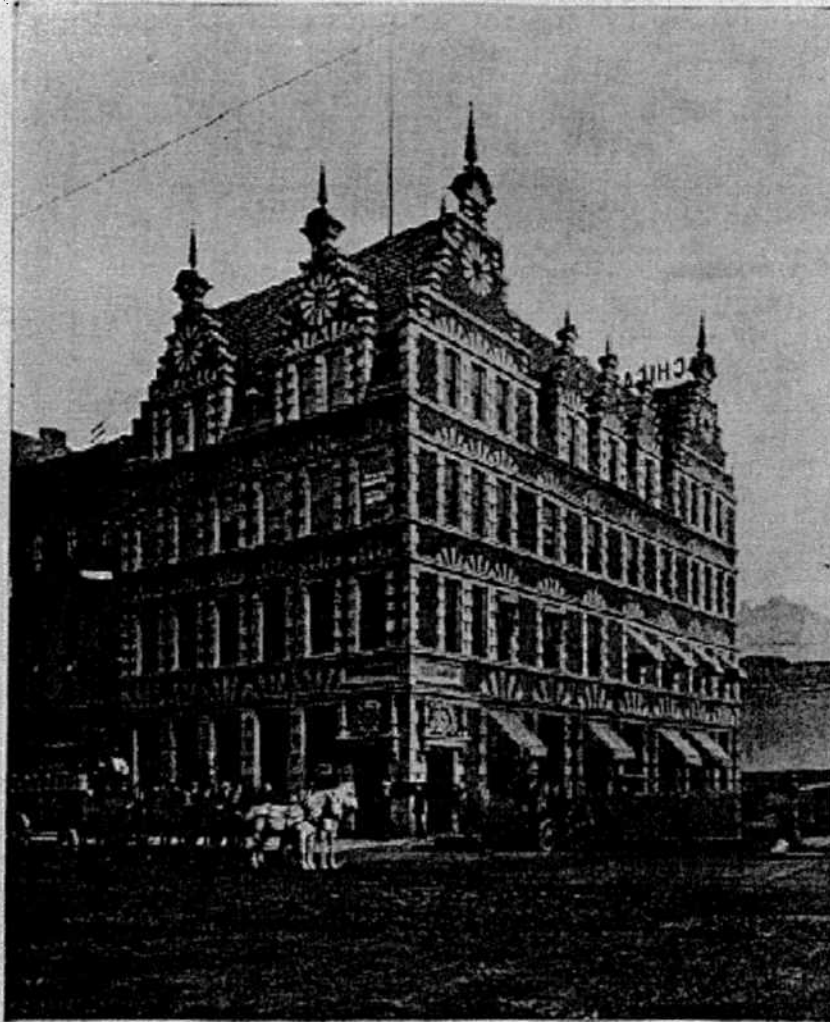
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Stephen Beal, for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks: p. 13 (Chicago Historical Society Building).

*Chicago and Its Makers*: p. 15.

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The Chicago Varnish Co. building, seen here in a c.1900 advertisement, was described in *A History of Chicago* (1900) as "pleasing and artistic in appearance, and said to be the only business block of this style of architecture in the country."

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